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Soviet Germ-Warfare Project Also Unsafe

The nuclear catastrophe in the Soviet Union dramatizes the risks involved when dangerous equipment is operated by a government that places little value on human safety. The world can only hope the Soviet bureaucracy will improve its nuclear safeguards as fast as possible.

One thing is clear, however: Moscow isn't about to scale down its nuclear power industry, no matter how serious the accident turns out to have been. Nuclear power is too important to the economy.

A similar, potentially cataclysmic situation exists in another field of reckless Soviet technology: the biological warfare program. Accidental release of deadly anthrax bacilli following an explosion at a germ weapons plant in Sverdlovsk in 1979 killed hundreds of Soviet citizens, but it didn't stop the Kremlin from forging ahead with its biological warfare program in defiance of a 1972 international treaty outlawing the development of such weapons.

Presumably the Soviets learned something from that disaster. But as their scientists tinker with germ weapons, there is always the possibility of an accident that could dwarf the nuclear meltdown. If Soviet scientists didn't know how to contain their burning reactor, there's little reason to expect they'd know how to counteract the accidental release of some newly developed bacterial agent.

We've reported in the past on the Soviets' growing biological warfare capabilities. Now we've seen the most recent CIA intelligence report on the subject, classified secret. It concludes:

"We believe the Soviets are using recent advances in biotechnology, such as genetic engineering, to develop a new class of BW and

toxin agents that can be rapidly produced for deployment." The time to deployment was estimated at five years.

New construction is pinpointed in the secret report. The Soviets in 1983 opened a weapons facility at Berdsk in a large chemical plant that produced bacteria for insecticide research. One section of the plant was off-limits to ordinary insecticide plant workers. "This information combined with imagery intelligence [satellite photos] provides evidence that at least part of the Berdsk facility is involved with BW research and production," the CIA reported.

In addition, the agency learned in 1984 "that the Soviets had partially completed a large complex south of Moscow, which we believe is a major institute in their program to develop genetically engineered biological warfare agents." The report adds that "ongoing construction at the facility south of Moscow near Serpukhov and at the Novosibirsk Institute demonstrates a continuing Soviet commitment of resources to their BW program."

The CIA notes two encouraging developments since the Reagan administration publicly accused the Soviets of killing Afghans and Southeast Asians with poisonous mycotoxins. First, the Soviets have cut back on their use of lethal poison gas in the last two years; second, "official representatives of a number of nations have indicated privately that their own analysis supports the U.S. conclusion that the Soviets were using mycotoxins. But "for a variety of domestic reasons, most of these countries have refused to make public statements to that effect."